

SONGS FOR DESOLATE HEARTS

NO. 649

A SERMON
DELIVERED ON SUNDAY MORNING, SEPTEMBER 10, 1865,
BY C. H. SPURGEON,
AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

*“Sing, O barren, you that did not bear; break forth into singing, and cry aloud,
you that did not travail with child: for more are the children of the desolate
than the children of the married wife, says the LORD.”*
Isaiah 54:1.

IT was a great sorrow to an Eastern woman to be childless. In modern times, that affliction is endured with cheerful composure, but in those days it was regarded as a dreadful curse, and the feelings of those afflicted by it were of the most painful kind, as we find in the case of Hannah. Alas! for human nature, those who were favored with children were often guilty of cruel haughtiness and taunting derision towards those who were not so blessed. We may instance the case of Peninnah over Hannah, and Hagar over her mistress Sarah. We must therefore endeavor to bring our minds to the Eastern idea, and we shall then have before us a case of very great, deep, constant, abiding, bitter sorrow, and yet the person in that case is bidden to sing, and to rejoice aloud, because the visitation of God’s mercy should soon come to make desolation itself glad.

I. The text shall first of all be taken in its reference TO THE CHURCH OF GOD.

For a long season before the coming of Christ, the church of God was desolate. Few were her sons and daughters. Her solemn feast days were attended by a multitude of hypocrites, and her courts were crowded with formalists, but the genuine children of Israel were sadly few. And when the Lord, the Husband of the church, Himself arrived, the church was in no happy condition. And even while He remained with her, her joy was not complete, for Christ’s ministry was, with all reverence to His name—by His own appointment, doubtless—comparatively an unsuccessful one.

After all His preaching, there were but some one hundred and twenty persons who believed on Him. “He came unto his own, and his own received Him not.” The children of the married wife were but very, very few. Isaiah’s wailing might have been heard all through the life of Christ, “Who has believed our report? And to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed? For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he has no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him.”

What a dark night that must have been when the Savior was betrayed by Judas! Ah! church of God, what will come of you now? While the Bridegroom was with you, your children were but few, and now that He is taken away to prison and to death, what will you do? As for your sons, you cannot rely upon them. Yonder is Peter, denying his Master with oaths and curses. John—even the loving John—has forsaken Him and fled. They have all gone their ways. They have all turned their backs. Like the children of Ephraim, “Being armed and carrying bows, they have turned their backs in the day of battle.”

Alas for you, Zion, for now you are desolate! Your Husband is led away captive. Your sons have forsaken you—your hour of mourning has come! Still darker must have been the hour when Salem’s daughters wept around the Savior led away to a shameful crucifixion along the *Via Dolorosa*. See Him as He dyes the streets of Jerusalem with blood-drops trickling from His thorn-crowned head. He is taken without the camp to the mount of doom. They fasten Him to the wood. They lift Him high upon the cross—His enemies compass Him about—the bulls of Bashan roar upon Him, and the dogs of hell bark about Him. Where are you now, O Zion? Save a few that cluster around the shameful tree, where are your sons and daughters now? Your sun has set forever, and your candle is gone out in darkness!

So unbelief whispers, but not thus speaks the Lord, for after the Lord had been lain in the grave, and risen again, and ascended, and left the church, then were the days of refreshing, and the times of the visitation of the Spirit. Suddenly, when the saints were met together in an upper room, for they were so few that they could all be enclosed within one room, there was heard a sound as of “a rushing mighty wind,” and suddenly flames of fire sat on each chosen one.

Then was fulfilled the saying of the prophet Joel, “I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.” Rejoice, O Zion. Sing you barren, you that did not bear, for three thousand are your children in one day, and there are multitudes yet to come. There are added to the church daily of such as shall be saved, and the multitude increases. Persecution scatters them, but as they scatter they grow—in every land, the church of God has its sons and daughters. Even in the palace of the Caesars, truth is confessed. Mountains cannot stay the progress of Messiah’s kingdom. Goths and Gauls, uncivilized men of war, feel the potent power of the love of the cross.

From eastern coast to western, Jupiter and Venus fall from their thrones, and Jesus Christ is exalted. “From the river even to the ends of the earth,” His name is known. Thus, you see there was to the whole church at Jerusalem a glorious fulfillment of this text, “Sing, O barren, you that did not bear.” And more were the children of the desolate church in the absence of her Lord than when she was as a married wife having Jesus Christ the Bridegroom with her.

Although this is a well-known fact, it ought not to be passed over without a little thought, because it is very pleasant to recollect that at all seasons when the church has been desolate and has become barren, God has appeared to her. In the dark ages, when the children of the church were a little and hidden flock, probably a few monks in monasteries holding a faith which they dared not confess, and feeding it by turning over the Bible in secret, there a handful among the mountains of Piedmont, the Albigenes and Waldenses, a few scattered ones among the Nestorians, and a few “even in Sardis” who had not defiled their garments. The poor church was barren.

There were no ministers, but here and there one to preach the Gospel, and these were hunted like partridges upon the mountains by those who thirsted for their blood. She might have taken up her wailing, and her heart might have sounded like a harp for her ruin and decay, but in her hour of dire necessity, the Lord appeared to her, and the children of the desolate were suddenly many.

The monk of Wirtemberg began to proclaim the Gospel. The mighty seer of Geneva stood up and declared the truth as it is in Jesus, distinctly enunciating the glorious doctrines of grace. Zwingli, full of fire and energy, led on the saints in Switzerland. It is true the stakes began to flame with their victims, the racks were red with the blood of martyrs, and prisons crowded with the elect of God—but what mattered it? The day was come when God had visited His people, and as in some desperate fight when suddenly a reinforcement comes with a mighty captain at its head, and every man along the line gathers courage, every coward becomes a hero, and every hero seems gifted with a thousand hands—each hand filled with a two-edged sword—even so it was in that day of struggle and of victory. A song went up from earth even to heaven, “Sing unto the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; his own right hand, and His holy arm has gotten Him the victory!”

Nor has God failed since the days of the Reformation. We in England had gone to sleep. The Church of England was sleeping in the dark. Dissenters were sleeping in the light. That was the only difference between them. There seemed to be no breath of life throughout the whole of England. Spiritual death crept over all ministers and all professors. There were, of course, a few exceptions, but those were, alas! so weak and so isolated that they could effect but little.

Six young men were expelled from Oxford for the egregious crime of praying. Among those young men were three destined to carve their names in everlasting rock—the two Wesleys and George Whitefield. These men, little knowing whereunto they were called, preached the Word, first of all in the regular and orderly fashion, but still with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven. They were driven by persecution to the gross irregularity of preaching in the open air. Blessed day! Whether they stood on the

tombstone, and preached to the living from the portals of the grave, or by the mountainside, calling heaven and earth to witness, it mattered not.

The Gospel had broken from the chains of lethargic propriety. And what a change, my brethren, came over the spirit of the age! “The LORD gave the word: great was the multitude of them who published it.” The fire came down from heaven like that of old in Pharaoh’s day, and it ran along upon the ground and consumed the enemies of God. Irresistible as the lightning flash it descended and none could stand against it—for the day of the Lord was come, and it was a day of burning and a day of might, and blessed be the name of God, “the children of the desolate” were many.

Now we know what has been said concerning the church of God in England at the present time, and here is the practical lesson I want you to gather. Some of our brothers are perfectly contented. I cannot number myself among those who think that the church is flourishing, and that vital godliness is abundant. It may be so, brethren, it may be so. I wish I could thoroughly feel satisfied of it. I would not, however, on the other hand, unite myself altogether with the ranks of the alarmists who say that everything is wrong.

The Christian church, according to some, is nothing but a mass of hypocrisy. We are all going post haste, as fast as ever we can, towards Romanism, and Romanism is next door to the abode of the devil himself. We are supposed to be going down, down, down a most precipitous descent. Well, I do not know. It may be so. I wish I was quite sure it was not so. I hardly think it, but I strike the balance between the two, and rejoice with trembling.

On this we may all be agreed, there is an abundant room both for mourning because we have not the presence of God as once we had it, and on the other hand, for a hopeful anxiety that yet our desolation may be turned into fruitfulness. Supposing—taking the worst view of the case—supposing it be so—and I am sure there is very much truth in the supposition—suppose it be so that the sturdiness with which we once held orthodoxy is giving place to a trifling latitudinarianism? Suppose it to be true that the enthusiasm, which once made us worthy to be called fanatics, is gradually dwindling down into indifference? Suppose it to be so that the Puritan rigidity of morals, which once made the professing Christian something amazing to look upon, is now turning into a looseness and laxity of behavior? Well, then, we are like the barren and desolate woman. But at any rate, we have a promise still to cling to, and we will hold it fast, “Sing, O barren, you that did not bear; break forth into singing, and cry aloud, you that did not travail with child: for more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife, says the LORD.”

Doubt not but that the Lord will appear for His church even yet. Let not your gloomy apprehensiveness cause your hands to hang down, for in your darkest night, God will suddenly light a candle. It may be that He will let wickedness grow ripe, and not send forth the reaper, the ordained man, with the sickle to cut it down, till it is ripe. It may be that He may let iniquity abound, and the love of many may wax cold, but fear not. Though He never is before His time, He never is behind. He will come punctually at the moment, in a time which shall be best for His church, and most for His own glory.

Once again we shall hail the happy days of revival, and the seasons of gladness of heart—when “one shall say, I am the LORD’s, and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob,” and the children of Zion “shall spring up as willows by the watercourses.” Let us hope and labor. Let us lament our desolation. Let us expect the gracious visitation, and it shall yet come, and we shall “sing together,” even we, “the waste places of Jerusalem.”

II. I now intend to use the text, as God helps me, in reference to ANY ONE CHURCH.

I do not think that what I have to say now will have very special reference to the church which meets in this place, for we have reason to thank God, that through eleven years or more, we have had about as high a flood-tide of revival as we could well endure. And I do not know if God had given us more conversions, what we should have done with them. He has already increased our numbers so marvelously, that we scarcely know how we shall oversee the whole. And it becomes almost a matter of necessity that some should swarm off to form other churches. But still a part of what is said may,

nevertheless, apply to our case. And as there are many brethren and sisters here from the country, and yet since some twenty or thirty thousand will read these words, I shall not speak without having an audience, even though not a word may belong to the members of this church.

Let us observe, then, that *there are some separate churches which are in a very sad condition and may most truly be said to be barren and desolate*. Do we not know some in our land which are cursed with a lifeless ministry? A ministry which murders the truth by a drawling, careless utterance of it? A ministry without force or life? Some ministries are not truthful. They may preach part of the truth, but not the whole—ministries, which, for some reason or other, give prominence to one or two doctrines, while other parts of the truth, equally precious, are kept back from the people. And the whole of what is preached is too often delivered in a cold, official, ministerial manner, without passion or earnestness, and so the church necessarily, I may say, becomes barren.

And how many churches have to complain of worldly church officers! We cannot help observing with grief and regret that certain church officers are far more active when they are in the world than they are in the church, and that if they show some little common sense in conducting their own business, they show little enough in managing Christ's business. They put out both their hands, and all their heart when the matter is one of personal gain, but when it is only that the church of God may be fed, or that the boundaries of Zion may be enlarged, they go about it as though it were a thing of no consequence, or of very small importance.

And worse than this, for the church might still live even with a lifeless ministry, and a worldly deaconship and eldership, but often there is a lifeless membership. How many churches are there where a large portion of members scarcely think of assembling themselves together for supplication? Where, if there be any life, it seems to expend itself in quarrelling and fault-finding? They do not contend earnestly for "the faith once delivered to the saints," against the common foe, but they wrangle over that faith and make foes of one another.

Oh! how many Christians there are who can boast of respectability—there are no end of carriages at the door. They can talk of the wealth, the large subscriptions which they can give to God's cause, but where is their zeal and the sounding of their hearts over dying men? Where are the tears that move the heart of God? Where are the sighs and cries which bring down a blessing upon the preached Word? Alas! in many of our churches, echo can only answer to the question, "Where are they?" with the refrain, "Where are they?" for they are gone, and gone so long that some Christians seem content that they should be gone forever. They scarcely remember the time when they were in earnest, the period when the bedewing of the Holy Ghost rested upon them.

I hesitate not to say solemnly that I know in our own denomination there are many, many churches in such a state of desolation, that if the places where they worship were closed, it would be small loss to the neighborhoods in which they stand. And if the ministry to which they listen were put out and silenced, it might be almost a gain—for it only enables the people to wrap themselves up in the idea that they are all right, and that they have the Spirit of God among them when they have only the name to live and are dead.

This being their present state, brethren present this morning, who are in earnest, will ask me *what is their present duty as members of such churches?* I reply, brethren, your duty is very plain. Labor to be conscious of the sad barrenness of the church to which you belong. Has the baptism pool not been stirred for the last five or six years? Will you be easy about that? Have there been no additions to the church for many months? Can you be satisfied about that? Do you observe an absence of all earnestness, of all passion and vehemence for the promotion of the Savior's kingdom? Can you be quiet about that?

If so, my dear friend, I really cannot say anything to you about what you can do, for it seems to me that you are not the person to whom I ought to appeal in this matter. But I will say, do labor, dear brethren, if you are members of churches that are not prospering, to be conscious of the sad mischief that you are doing. If the salt has lost its savor, it is henceforth good for nothing, it is neither fit for the land nor yet for the dunghill, and men cast it out. We can manage to struggle on with a bad trader, for he may

make a good politician or philosopher, but a dead church is good for nothing, good for nothing of any sort or in any way, it is only fit to be cast out. Even the dunghill rejects a dead church.

Oh! if we did but know it, the existence of the devil is not more pretentious of evil than the existence of a church that has lost spiritual life. Mind, I am not exaggerating, for I have a proof of it. What is the Church of Rome in its deadly operation upon the world, but the greatest curse that could ever come from hell itself? I question if hell can find a more fitting instrument within its infernal lake than the Church of Rome is for the cause of mischief.

And your church will, in its measure, be the same if bereft of the Spirit. I do not care if it be Wesleyan, Baptist, Independent, or what it is—when the life is gone, it becomes henceforth *good for nothing*—it is not even fit to manure the ground, as the contents of the dunghill are, but men cast it out and tread it under foot. Get conscious of that, and then let those of you who are humbled in the sight of God, meet together and spread the case before the Lord. We ought to have great faith in the power of the twos and threes, for, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them,” says the LORD.

The long thin red line, which has often won the battle, will yet win it in England—I mean the thin line of the few who sigh and cry for the desolations of the church. If you, my brother, an earnest man, be the only member of the church that does really sigh and cry before God, God intends to bless that church yet, for He has already blessed it in sending you to it. Look out for others of a kindred sort, and without murmuring, without raising divisions, without seeking to expel the minister or make any changes in the discipline, just set to work, and pray down, as Elijah did, the fire from heaven upon the sacrifice. This is the one thing which is wanted.

The wrong in organization, the mistakes in government, the unfitness of the church officers—all this will come right enough if you once get the divine life. But without this, though you should rectify everything else, you would have done but little to any real purpose. Let me beg of you, therefore, to spread the case before JEHOVAH, and be sure that you look away from everything that you yourself can do, to Him and to Him alone.

What can the barren woman do? What can she who is desolate do? Why, she can take this promise before God and say, “You have said, ‘Sing, O barren’—Lord, make me sing! You have said, ‘The children of the desolate shall yet be many’—Lord make our children many yet!” The desolate woman can do this, and your poor desolate heart, though you sigh and cry over the fewness of the congregation, and the coldness of the church members—your desolate heart can do the same. And doing it, you shall get an answer of peace. But mind you, do not pray without proving the sincerity of your prayers by action. Do bestir yourself, I have noticed that many who complain of a want of brotherly love are just the people who have least themselves. And those who see no spiritual life in a church are often the people who have no spiritual life themselves. They see without what they see within.

But I hope I am addressing myself to nobler men than these. You feel that you would not willfully and willingly make any false accusation against God’s saints, nor impeach them for anything in which they are not guilty. You love the church too well. You would rather paint her with your finger upon her spots, than magnify her blemishes. Well, dear brethren, if such is your state of heart, live and labor for Jesus Christ yourselves, and give the Lord no rest till this word of His servant Isaiah be fulfilled to the very letter. This my message may seem to be of no importance to some here present, yet I hope it may be fraught with usefulness to churches represented here by gracious and godly men.

III. By your leave, we will now turn to a third use of our text. Here the case is before us—THE POOR HELPLESS SINNER HAS HIS CASE WELL DESCRIBED BY THE PROPHET AS BARREN AND DESOLATE.

I will speak for you, and you will recognize your own words. “*Barren!* ah, that I am. I have not one meritorious fruit that I can bring before God. As well might one expect to gather grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles, as to find any good thing in me. My heart is a fountain of polluted waters, and all that comes forth deserves to be called Marah! Marah!—for every drop is bitter. How is it possible that *I* can

ever hope, while I see in myself all that is evil and nothing that is good? Alas! I am not only barren of merit, but I am also barren of feeling. I ought to be humbled on account of sin, but I am not. My eye-balls ought to be perpetual conduits of tears, but they are dry. My heart should be like Moses' rock when it was smitten, but alas! it is a flinty rock yielding no water. O that my heart would break. O that I were truly contrite. Unto the contrite and broken heart the Lord will have regard, but I am barren even of that.

"And alas, I seem to be barren even in prayer. If I get upon my knees, I cannot pray. 'God be merciful to me, a sinner,' is as far as I can reach. And I am afraid I am so barren that I cannot even pray that prayer as the publican prayed it, so as to get acceptance. I come down from my closet with the sense that I have tried to pray, but that I have been so distracted both with doubts and with wandering thoughts, that I have rather multiplied my sins than had any prevalence with God. I am commanded to believe in Jesus, and I wish I could exert faith in Him.

*'O could I but believe!
Then all would easy be.
I would, but cannot—Lord, relieve—
My help must come from Thee!'*

I have a will, but I have no power. I can say, 'To will is present with me'—and I am thankful to God for that—but 'how to perform that which I would, I find not.' I am barren of merit, barren of feeling, barren of power, barren of prayer, barren of faith. I am barren—barren with a vengeance."

Yes, and sinner, it is very probable that I can also speak out your heart if I take the word, "*desolate*." You are desolate, too—no one can comfort you. The friend to whom you told your trouble, tried his best, but he could not succeed in cheering your heavy heart. You have been up to this house sometimes, hoping that I might say a word, but I have only added fuel to the flame, for the truth preached has been far from comfortable to you. It has rather depressed you and brought you lower still.

You have listened, you have read good books, you have turned over Scripture, but for all that, there does not seem to be a text that speaks comfortably to you, but the threatenings leap up out of the page, and seem as if they would drag you down, as the dogs drag down the stag when they seize him for their prey. You are "*desolate*" as a poor lone wanderer who has lost his way far out in the desert. He looks around upon the horizon, and sees not one single hope or gleam of hope, but far above he sees the cruel vulture, waiting for his lifeless corpse.

So it is with you—you see the vultures of hell ready to devour you, and there is no hope, no comfort whatever. You are barren and you are desolate. I will tell you one of your thoughts. You have often envied those whom you would not envy if you knew better. You poor barren souls have often envied "the married wife." I mean the Pharisee—you have said of him, "Ah, I wish I could say that I was not as other men are. I wish I could say I had not sinned, but had walked in righteousness—'All these things have I kept from my youth up'—O that I could say that!"

You have heard these married wives, as it were, boast of all their goodness, and you have looked at them and thought, "What blessed people they must be! O that I could see what they can see!" There are some about in the world who preach up human ability, who tell us that men can believe and can repent, and can do all sorts of spiritual actions. And there are some who think they can do them irrespective of the Holy Spirit. Well, then, I do not doubt but what you envy them. You say, "I wish I could feel as so-and-so. I wish I could rejoice as such-a-one does. Oh! if I could get as good a hope as he has." Hark to this, he is a hypocrite. "Oh! that I could be as full of peace as he is!" Mark, he is a mere formalist. "Oh! that I had his unbroken peace!" If you had such peace as he has, it would be your eternal ruin.

Poor, barren sinner, let me say this much to you. Your help is to be found, not in your barrenness, not in your desolation. Do not look to that as though it could help you. Your barrenness is barrenness forever if left to itself, and your desolation is utter and helpless unless someone shall intervene. May I ask you to look at the chapter which precedes my text? I wish the Bible had never been chopped up into

chapters at all, it spoils it so. It was not intended by the Holy Ghost that it should be—that is a human device. If you read it right on, you see how it runs—“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” You know how it continues till it gets to this—“He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for He shall bear their iniquities. Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he has poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. Sing, O barren, you that did not bear; break forth into singing, and cry aloud, you that did not travail with child.”

Do you see the drift of it? Jesus has taken the sinner’s sin upon Himself, and made a complete atonement. Therefore “Sing, O barren.” The mighty Redeemer has come out of His dwelling place, and has fought the enemy, and won the victory. “Sing, O barren.” Sin can be pardoned now, for Christ has died. “Sing, O barren!” Sinfulness can be conquered now, for Christ has won the victory over the hosts of hell. You barren one! All barren as you are, stand here and see that wondrous sight. He comes from Edom “with garments dyed in blood.” Can you see the blood upon His vestures? It is red as though He had trodden the wine vats. Can you see that blood? It is the blood of all your sins. They are gone! They are gone! O desolate! They are gone! The blood of all your foes—they are slain! O barren woman! They are slain!

And now He comes who vanquished hell. Can He not rescue you? “The prey shall be taken from the mighty, and the lawful captive shall be delivered.” And though you stood bound in iron, surrounded with darkness about you like that of Egypt, “which might be felt,” He could set you free.

*“He comes the prisoners to release,
In Satan’s bondage held.
The gates of brass before Him burst,
The iron fetters yield.”*

Your hope is in a bleeding Savior who is now ascended up on high to receive gifts for men. Surely I myself will lead the strain, while I ask you now, you barren ones, to sing. Break forth into singing and cry aloud, for your Redeemer is mighty and will save. Whereas you envied the Pharisee, you shall have greater joy than he. “More are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife.” Whereas you envied the proud man who said, “I can do this, and I can do the other,” you who could do nothing because you were so barren, shall be filled with such love, and endowed with such grace, you shall be admitted into such familiarity with Christ, such oneness with God, such glory with Him forever, that your joy, your glory, shall be far greater than the married wife could claim.

I pray the sinner, as he hears these gladsome words, to be obedient to them. Trust in the Savior, and “You shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace; the mountains and hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.”

IV. Does not this text, in the fourth place, belong to the DEPRESSED BELIEVER?

Here, as before, I can speak experientially. Beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ, you and I, though we have brought forth some fruit unto His name, and are still confident that we are “plants of his own right hand planting,” yet sometimes feel very barren. I hope *you* do not feel it so often as I do. There are occasions when, having preached to others, I have to examine myself, “lest I myself should be a castaway.”

I would, if I could, always weep for the sins and for the ruin of rebellious men. I would always feel tenderness of heart on account of those who reject His great salvation, but sometimes I am barren of all this. I feel my heart cold as a stone, and hard as a rock. Do you never feel, brethren, when you try to pray—you who have nearest access to God—that there are times when you cannot pray? You would wrestle with the angel, but it is as much as ever you can say, “Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.”

You want to love Christ, but instead of a furnace of love, you can only find a spark in your soul. Oh! how you want to burn, how you desire to grow, to mount, to reach to something higher and better than this poor dead level of a mere profession—but you cannot get up to it. O dew of heaven, water my dry branch! O river of God, flow hard by my poor barren root! For if not, I shall be always barren.

Have you not often felt desolate? I know the righteous man never is desolate, but still he sometimes thinks himself so. His soul abhors all manner of meat, and he refuses to be comforted. He was no bad man who said, “I watch and am as a sparrow alone upon the housetop,” for those who have looked the sun in the face have, nevertheless, sometimes had to say, “Look not on me, for I am black, because the sun has looked upon me.” Depressions of spirit, humiliating thoughts of one’s self, deep and grievous bondage—all these the children of God are well aware of, for with Paul we have, at times, to cry, “O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”

Beloved, it is well for us to know, as I am sure we do know experientially, that in this matter of barrenness and desolation, the creature can do but little. It is the Spirit that quickens, the flesh profits little. When we get into this state, then we feel like a man who cannot swim, and the more we kick and struggle, the more rapidly we sink. It seems as if all human energy were but the energy to sin, and a power to make us yet more dead to true spiritual life.

Well, what are we to do, then? Why, let us remember that the text is addressed to us in just such a state. “Sing, O barren, break forth and cry aloud, you that did not travail with child.” But what can I sing about? I cannot sing about the present. I cannot even sing concerning the past. Well, but yet I can sing of Jesus Christ, can I not? I can turn to that which precedes the text, and I can sing of visits which the Redeemer has aforesaid paid to me. Or if not of these, I can sing of the great love wherewith He loved His people when He came from the heights of heaven for their redemption. I will go to the cross again.

Come, my soul, heavy laden you were once, and you did lose your burden there. Come again, come again. Once you did wash in yonder fount, and you were clean. O my poor bespattered spirit, come and wash again. A prodigal I once returned. He fell upon my neck and kissed me then. I will go to Jesus yet once more. Though my sins rise like mountains, I will be obedient to the Word which says, “Return, you backsliding children, for I am married unto you, says the LORD.”

What is my barrenness? It is the platform for His divine power. What is my desolation? It is the black setting for the sapphire of His everlasting love. I will go in poverty. I will go in helplessness. I will go in all my shame and backsliding. I will tell Him that I am still His child, and in confidence in His faithful heart, I, even I, the barren one, will sing and cry aloud.

Beloved, I think this is a very delightful text for us to think upon—especially when we remember that the joy of hardened hearts is, by-and-by, greater than the joy of those who never did feel their barrenness so much. There are some Christians that seem to be like the married wife. They have an equable temperament, they are not much depressed, they keep the even tenor of their way. I know I often envy them. We have our ups and downs, but mark you, when our ups come, those who despised us when we were in the downs might very well envy us.

Though the valleys are dark and very gloomy, yet oh! the hilltops. The hilltops are so bright that when the Lord makes our feet to stand upon our high places, we no longer envy the married wife with all her ordinary calm and peace. We will take our trails for the sake of our joys—for as our tribulations abound, so our consolations abound in Christ Jesus.

V. And now, lastly, it strikes me that our text ought to have a very special voice TO THOSE CHRISTIANS WHO HAVE NOT BEEN SUCCESSFUL IN DOING GOOD.

As a church, I am sure it is our unanimous desire that we might bring forth spiritual children unto Christ Jesus. I hope I have not a single member of this church who is content to go to heaven alone. As far as I know you, I believe there is commonly among you this desire—that you may bring sinners to Christ. Now, it is possible that some dear brethren present have not yet been successful. You have been at work. You have been in prayer. You have depended upon Christ in simple faith, and hoped for His Spirit, but you still have been denied the happy privilege of being made useful.

Well, now, two or three words to you. You are barren and I am glad that while you are barren, your heart feels desolate, for you will not be barren long if you are unhappy in your barren state. Now, my dear friends, it may be possible that you are only barren in your own esteem. It is possible that God may have blessed you to many, though you think He has never blessed you to one. There may be somewhere precious jewels which you first brought up from the depths of sin—though *you* have not seen them glisten, Christ has, and though you thought you did not succeed the other day in your attempt, it is just possible that you are not a good judge of your own success.

Frequently, I have gone home groaning over a sermon which God has blessed to never-dying souls. And those very discourses which I have thought the worst of, God has blessed the most. I think we are not to be judges of how we do our work—that the Master knows better than we do the success of our enterprises. Beside, dear friends, you do not expect to see fruit at once, do you? “Cast your bread upon the waters, and you shall find it *tomorrow*”—is that the text? If I read rightly, it is, “You shall find it after *many days*.” You have not had your “many days” to wait yet. The farmer, when he plants corn, may plow in October or November, but he does not expect to have a harvest in January. He will wait till the season comes. And you husbandmen of the Lord, must wait and be patient for the precious fruits of your toil—“In due season you shall all reap if you faint not.” Therefore, wait on.

Perhaps, however, your barrenness really is true, and if so, ought not this greatly to humble you? You were not always barren, my brethren—when you were fruitful, did you give God all the glory? Were you very careful not to say, “Well done, I”? Possibly this barrenness has come upon you to make you feel your nothingness, and to qualify you for yet greater success. It often happens that before God means to bless His servants, He depresses them very greatly. Whether or not it is absolutely necessary, I cannot tell, but this I know, it is generally the rule that there is a flogging behind the door for the man whom God means to honor in public. He will give him a thorn in the flesh either before or after He gives him marvelous revelations. Dear friend, perhaps this is the reason.

“Well,” you say, “I do not know what the reason is, but I wish I could be rid of it, for I cannot bear to be useless, to be a tree cumbering the ground.” My dear brother, I am thrice glad to hear you say that, because now that you are really ashamed of being barren, you will soon be fruitful. And now that God makes you *loathe* to be without fruit, He will soon cover you with precious clusters.

One thing is certain—you cannot alter your being barren. You cannot yourself change your barrenness into fruitfulness. But is it not significant that my text should stand just after the passage to which I have invited your attention just now? Just after the story of the despised and rejected Savior, stands this note of joy for you poor barren ones. Let me invite you, then, to come to the cross. Perhaps that very cross, which gave you life, may give you fruitfulness. You have found help there before—may you not find vigor there now?

Brethren and sisters, my fellow workers for Christ Jesus, let us look up and view the flowing of the Savior’s precious blood. Let us see the chastisement of our peace as it falls in cruel blows upon His blessed shoulders. Let us see the scourging. Let us mark the blood-drops as they roll down to the ground, and what do we feel but this?—

*“Now for the love I bear His name,
What was my gain, I count my loss,
My former pride I call my shame,
And nail my glory to His cross.*

*Yes, and I must and will esteem
All things but loss for Jesus’ sake—
O may my soul be found in Him,
And of His righteousness partake.”*

O beloved, there is nothing like a sight of the Savior. I have heard of a minister who was ready to give up his work, but he fell asleep and dreamed that he saw the thorn-crowned Redeemer reaping with a sweat of blood upon His face. The crucified One said to him, as He saw him standing idly by, "Could you not reap with Me one hour?" He seized a sickle and worked on, and on, and on, with the crucified One at his side, and his strength grew as he continued at his work.

O servants of God, will you depart from your work when the pierced hand is at your side? Courage! my brethren, courage! We cannot fail, for Christ is with us. And we must not cease, for Jesus ceases not. Together let us praise our Lord that He has sent us this morning such a promise to gird about our loins, to make us strong even to the end. "Sing, O barren, you that did not bear; break forth into singing, and cry aloud you that did not travail with child: for more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife, says the LORD."

The Lord grant it may be so to us for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

Taken from The C. H. Spurgeon Collection, Version 1.0, Ages Software. Only necessary changes have been made, such as correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.